THE WAR ON CLICHÉ

This may be the most demanding time in history to be a writer. Compare the story-saturated audience of today to that of centuries past. How many times a year did educated Victorians go to the theatre? In an era of huge families and no automatic dishwashers, how much time did they have for fiction? In a typical week our great-great-grandparents may have read or seen five or six hours of story—what many of us now consume per day. By the time modern filmgoers sit down to your work, they’ve absorbed tens of thousands of hours of TV, movies, prose, and theatre. What will you create that they haven’t seen before? Where will you find a truly original story? How will you win the war on cliché?

Cliché is at the root of audience dissatisfaction, and like a plague spread through ignorance, it now infects all story media. Too often we close novels or exit theatres bored by an ending that was obvious from the beginning, disgruntled because we’ve seen these clichéd scenes and characters too many times before. The cause of this worldwide epidemic is simple and clear: the source of all clichés can be traced to one thing and one thing alone: The writer does not know the world of his story.

Such writers select a setting and launch a screenplay assuming a knowledge of their fictional world that they don’t have. As they reach into their minds for material, they come up empty. So where do they run? To films and TV, novels and plays with similar settings. From
the works of other writers they crib scenes we've seen before, paraphrase dialogue we've heard before, disguise characters we've met before, and pass them off as their own. They reheat literary leftovers and serve up plates of boredom because, regardless of their talents, they lack an in-depth understanding of their story's setting and all it contains. Knowledge of and insight into the world of your story is fundamental to the achievement of originality and excellence.

**SETTING**

A story's **SETTING is four-dimensional**—*Period, Duration, Location, Level of Conflict.*

The first dimension of time is *Period.* Is the story set in the contemporary world? In history? A hypothetical future? Or is it that rare fantasy, such as *ANIMAL FARM* or *WATERSHIP DOWN,* in which location in time is unknowable and irrelevant?

**PERIOD** is a story's place in time.

Duration is the second dimension of time. How much time does the story span within the lives of your characters? Decades? Years? Months? Days? Is it that rare work in which storyline equals screentime, such as *MY DINNER WITH ANDRE,* a two-hour movie about a two-hour dinner?

Or rarer still, *LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD,* a film that liquefies time into timelessness? It's conceivable, through cross-cutting, overlap, repetition, and/or slow motion, for screentime to surpass storyline. Although no feature-length film has attempted this, a few sequences have done it brilliantly—most famous of all, the "Odessa Steps" sequence of *THE BATTLESHIP ADMIRAL.* The actual assault by the Tsar's army on the Odessa protesters took no more than two or three minutes, the time needed for jackbooted feet to march down the steps from top to bottom. Onscreen the terror expands to five times this length.
DURATION is a story's length through time.


LOCATION is a story's place in space.

Level of Conflict is the human dimension. A setting includes not only its physical and temporal domain, but social as well. This dimension becomes vertical in this sense: At what Level of Conflict do you pitch your telling? No matter how externalized in institutions or internalized in individuals, the political, economic, ideological, biological, and psychological forces of society shape events as much as period, landscape, or costume. Therefore, the cast of characters, containing its various levels of conflict, is part of a story's setting.

Does your story focus on the inner, even unconscious conflicts within your characters? Or coming up a level, on personal conflicts? Or higher and wider, on battles with institutions in society? Wider still, on struggles against forces of the environment? From the subconscious to the stars, through all the multilayered experiences of life, your story may be set at any one or any combination of these levels.

LEVEL OF CONFLICT is the story's position on the hierarchy of human struggles.

The Relationship Between Structure and Setting
A story's setting sharply defines and confines its possibilities.

Although your setting is a fiction, not everything that comes to mind may be allowed to happen in it. Within any world, no matter how imaginary, only certain events are possible or probable.

If your drama is set among the gated estates of West L.A., we won't see homeowners protesting social injustice by rioting in their tree-lined streets, although they might throw a thousand-dollar-a-plate fund-raiser. If your setting is the housing projects of East
L.A.’s ghetto, these citizens won’t dine at thousand-dollar-a-plate galas, but they might hit the streets to demand change.

A STORY must obey its own internal laws of probability. The event choices of the writer, therefore, are limited to the possibilities and probabilities within the world he creates.

Each fictional world creates a unique cosmology and makes its own “rules” for how and why things happen within it. No matter how realistic or bizarre the setting, once its causal principles are established, they cannot change. In fact, of all genres Fantasy is the most rigid and structurally conventional. We give the fantasy writer one great leap away from reality, then demand tight-knit probabilities and no coincidence—the strict Archplot of THE WIZARD OF OZ, for example. On the other hand, a gritty realism often allows leaps in logic. In THE USUAL SUSPECTS, for example, screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie arrests his wild improbabilities inside the “law” of free association.

Stories do not materialize from a void but grow out of materials already in history and human experience. From its first glimpse of the first image, the audience inspects your fictional universe, sorting the possible from the impossible, the likely from the unlikely. Consciously and unconsciously, it wants to know your “laws,” to learn how and why things happen in your specific world. You create these possibilities and limitations through your personal choice of setting and the way you work within it. Having invented these strictures, you’re bound to a contract you must keep. For once the audience grasps the laws of your reality, it feels violated if you break them and rejects your work as illogical and unconvincing.

Seen this way, the setting may feel like a straitjacket to the imagination. When working in development, I’m often struck by how writers try to wriggle out of its restraints by refusing to be specific. “What’s your setting?” I’ll ask. “America,” the writer cheerfully answers. “Sounds a bit vast. Got any particular neighborhood in mind?” “Bob, it won’t matter. This is your quintessential American
story. It's about divorce. What could be more American? We can set it in Louisiana, New York, or Idaho. Won't matter." But it matters absolutely. Breakup in the Bayou bears little resemblance to a multi-million-dollar Park Avenue litigation, and neither looks like infidelity on a potato farm. There is no such thing as a portable story. An honest story is at home in one, and only one, place and time.

THE PRINCIPLE OF CREATIVE LIMITATION

Limitation is vital. The first step toward a well-told story is to create a small, knowable world. Artists by nature crave freedom, so the principle that the structure/setting relationship restricts creative choices may stir the rebel in you. With a closer look, however, you'll see that this relationship couldn't be more positive. The constraint that setting imposes on story design doesn't inhibit creativity; it inspires it.

All fine stories take place within a limited, knowable world. No matter how grand a fictional world may seem, with a close look you'll discover that it's remarkably small. CRIME AND PUNISHMENT is microscopic. WAR AND PEACE, although played against a landscape of Russia in turmoil, is the focused tale of a handful of characters and their interrelated families. DR. STRANGELOVE is set in the office of General Jack D. Ripper, a Flying Fortress heading for Russia, and the War Room of the Pentagon. It climaxes in planetary nuclear annihilation, but the telling is limited to three sets and eight principal characters.

The world of a story must be small enough that the mind of a single artist can surround the fictional universe it creates and come to know it in the same depth and detail that God knows the one He created. As my mother used to say, "Not a sparrow falls that God does not know." Not a sparrow should fall in the world of a writer that he wouldn't know. By the time you finish your last draft, you must possess a commanding knowledge of your setting in such depth and detail that no one could raise a question about your world—from the eating habits of your characters to the weather in September—that you couldn't answer instantly.
A “small” world, however, does not mean a trivial world. Art consists of separating one tiny piece from the rest of the universe and holding it up in such a way that it appears to be the most important, fascinating thing of this moment. “Small,” in this case, means knowable.

“Commanding knowledge” does not mean an extended awareness into every crevice of existence. It means knowledge of all that’s germane. This may seem an impossible ideal, but the best writers attain it every day. What relevant question about the time, place, and characters of CRIES AND WHISPERS would elude Ingmar Bergman? Or David Mamet of GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS? Or John Cleese of A FISH CALLED WANDA? It’s not that fine artists give deliberate, conscious thought to each and every aspect of life implied by their stories, but at some level they absorb it all. Great writers know. Therefore, work within what’s knowable. A vast, populous world stretches the mind so thinly that knowledge must be superficial. A limited world and restricted cast offer the possibility of knowledge in depth and breadth.

The irony of setting versus story is this: The larger the world, the more diluted the knowledge of the writer, therefore the fewer his creative choices and the more clichéd the story. The smaller the world, the more complete the knowledge of the writer, therefore the greater his creative choices. Result: a fully original story and victory in the war on cliché.

RESEARCH

The key to winning this war is research, taking the time and effort to acquire knowledge. I suggest these specific methods: research of memory, research of imagination, research of fact. Generally, a story needs all three.

Memory

Lean back from your desk and ask, “What do I know from personal experience that touches on my characters’ lives?”

You’re writing, let’s say, about a middle-aged executive who faces a career-making/career-destroying presentation. His personal and
professional life hangs in the balance. He's afraid. How does fear feel? Slowly, memory takes you back to the day your mother, for reasons you'll never understand, locked you in a closet, left the house, and didn't come back until the next day. Bring back those long, fright-filled hours when the dark smothered you. Could your character feel the same? If so, vividly describe your day and night in the closet. You may think you know, but you don't know you know until you can write it down. Research is not daydreaming. Explore your past, relive it, then write it down. In your head it's only memory, but written down it becomes working knowledge. Now with the bile of fear in your belly, write an honest, one-of-a-kind scene.

**Imagination**

Lean back and ask, "What would it be like to live my character's life hour by hour, day by day?"

In vivid detail sketch how your characters shop, make love, pray—scenes that may or may not find their way into your story, but draw you into your imagined world until it feels like déjà vu. While memory gives us whole chunks of life, imagination takes fragments, slivers of dream, and chips of experience that seem unrelated, then seeks their hidden connections and merges them into a whole. Having found these links and envisioned the scenes, write them down. A working imagination is research.

**Fact**

Have you ever had writer's block? Scary, isn't it? Days drag by and nothing gets written. Cleaning the garage looks like fun. You rearrange your desk over and over and over until you think you're losing your mind. I know a cure, but it isn't a trip to your psychiatrist. It's a trip to the library.

You're blocked because you have nothing to say. Your talent didn't abandon you. If you had something to say, you couldn't stop yourself from writing. You can't kill your talent, but you can starve it into a coma through ignorance. For no matter how talented, the
ignorant cannot write. Talent must be stimulated by facts and ideas. Do research. Feed your talent. Research not only wins the war on cliche, it’s the key to victory over fear and its cousin, depression.

Suppose, for example, you’re writing in the genre of Domestic Drama. You were raised in a family, perhaps you’ve raised a family, you’ve seen families, you can imagine families. But if you were go to the library and read respected works on the dynamics of family life, two very important things would happen:

1. Everything life has taught you would be powerfully confirmed. On page after page you’ll recognize your own family. This discovery, that your personal experience is universal, is critical. It means you’ll have an audience. You’ll write in a singular way, but audiences everywhere will understand because the patterns of family are ubiquitous. What you’ve experienced in your domestic life is analogous to all others—the rivalries and alliances, loyalties and betrayals, pains and joys. As you express emotions you feel are yours and yours alone, each member of the audience will recognize them as his and his alone.

2. No matter how many families you live in, how many you observe, or how vivid your imagination, your knowledge of the nature of family is limited to the finite circle of your experience. But as you take notes in the library, your solid, factual research will expand that circle globally. You’ll be struck by sudden and powerful insights and reach a depth of understanding you couldn’t have gained any other way.

Research from memory, imagination, and fact is often followed by a phenomenon that authors love to describe in mystical terms: Characters suddenly spring to life and of their own free will will make choices and take actions that create Turning Points that twist, build, and turn again until the writer can hardly type fast enough to keep up with the outpourings.

This “virgin birth” is a charming self-deception writers love to indulge in, but the sudden impression that the story is writing
itself simply marks the moment when a writer's knowledge of the subject has reached the saturation point. The writer becomes the god of his little universe and is amazed by what seems to be spontaneous creation, but is in fact the reward for hard work.

Be warned, however. While research provides material, it's no substitute for creativity. Biographical, psychological, physical, political, and historical research of the setting and cast is essential but pointless if it doesn't lead to the creation of events. A story is not an accumulation of information strung into a narrative, but a design of events to carry us to a meaningful climax.

What's more, research must not become procrastination. Too many insecure talents spend years in study and never actually write anything. Research is meat to feed the beasts of imagination and invention, never an end in itself. Nor is there a necessary sequence to research. We do not first fill notebooks full of social, biographical, and historical studies, and once all this work is done, begin to compose a story. Creativity is rarely so rational. Origination and exploration go on alternatively.

Imagine writing a Psycho-Thriller. You begin perhaps with a "What if . . ." What would happen if a psychiatrist violated her professional ethics and began an affair with her patient? Intrigued, you wonder, Who is this doctor? Patient? Perhaps he's a soldier, shell-shocked, catatonic. Why does she fall for him? You analyze and explore until growing knowledge leads to wild speculation: Suppose she falls when her treatment seems to work a miracle: Under hypnosis his wide-eyed paralysis melts away to reveal a beautiful, almost angelic personality.

That turn seems too sweet to be true, so you go on a hunt in the other direction, and deep in your studies you come across the concept of successful schizophrenia: Some psychotics possess such extreme intelligence and willpower they can easily hide their madness from everyone around them, even their psychiatrists. Could your patient be one of these? Could your doctor be in love with a madman she thinks she's cured?

As new ideas seed your story, story and characters grow; as your story grows, questions are raised and it hungers for more
research. Creation and investigation go back and forth, making demands on each other, pushing and pulling this way or that until the story shakes itself out, complete and alive.

CREATIVE CHOICES

Fine writing is never one to one, never a matter of devising the exact number of events necessary to fill a story, then penciling in dialogue. Creativity is five to one, perhaps ten or twenty to one. The craft demands the invention of far more material than you can possibly use, then the astute selection from this quantity of quality events, moments of originality that are true to character and true to world. When actors compliment each other, for example, they often say, "I like your choices." They know that if a colleague has arrived at a beautiful moment, it's because in rehearsal the actor tried it twenty different ways, then chose the one perfect moment. The same is true for us.

CREATIVITY means creative choices of inclusion and exclusion.

Imagine writing a romantic comedy set on the East Side of Manhattan. Your thoughts meander back and forth between the separate lives of your characters, searching for that perfect moment when the lovers meet. Then sudden inspiration: "A singles bar! That's it! They meet at P. J. Clarke's!" And why not? Given the affluent New Yorkers of your imagining, meeting in a singles bar is certainly possible. Why not? Because it's a dreadful cliché. It was a fresh idea when Dustin Hoffman met Mia Farrow in JOHN AND MARY, but since then, yuppie lovers have bumped into each other in a singles bar in film after film, soap operas, and sitcoms.

But if you know the craft, you know how to cure clichés: Sketch a list of five, ten, fifteen different "East Side lovers meet" scenes. Why? Because experienced writers never trust so-called inspiration. More often than not, inspiration is the first idea picked off the top of your head, and sitting on the top of your head is every film you've ever seen, every novel you've ever read, offering clichés to
pluck. This is why we fall in love with an idea on Monday, sleep on it, then reread it with disgust on Tuesday as we realize we’ve seen this cliché in a dozen other works. True inspiration comes from a deeper source, so let loose your imagination and experiment:

1. *Singles Bar.* Cliché, but a choice. Don’t throw it away yet.
2. *Park Avenue.* A tire blows out on his BMW. He stands at the curb, helpless in his three-piece suit. She comes along on her motorcycle and takes pity on him. She gets out the spare, and as she doctors the car, he plays nurse, handing her jack handle, lug nuts, wheel cover . . . until suddenly eyes meet and sparks fly.
3. *Toilet.* She’s so drunk at the office Christmas party that she stumbles into the men’s room to throw up. He finds her collapsed on the floor. Quickly, before others enter, he locks the stall door and helps her through her illness. When the coast is clear he sneaks her out, saving her embarrassment.

On and on the list grows. You needn’t write out these scenes in full. You’re on a search for ideas, so simply sketch the bold strokes of what happens. If you know your characters and world in depth, a dozen or more such scenes won’t be a difficult task. Once you’ve exhausted your best ideas, survey your list, asking these questions: Which scene is truest to my characters? Truest to their world? *And has never been on the screen quite this way before?* This is the one you write into the screenplay.

Suppose, however, as you question the meeting-cute scenes on your list, deep in your gut you realize that, while all have their virtues, your first impression was right. Cliché or not, these lovers would meet in a singles bar; nothing could be more expressive of their natures and milieu. Now what do you do? Follow your instincts and start a new list: a dozen different ways to meet in a singles bar. Research this world, hang out, observe the crowd, get involved, until you know the singles bar scene like no writer before you.

Scanning your new list you ask the same questions: Which variation is truest to character and world? Which has never been
onscreen before? When your script becomes a film and the camera dollies toward a singles bar, the audience’s first reaction may be, “Oh man, not another singles bar scene.” But then you take them through the door, show them what really goes on in those meat racks. If you’ve done your task well, jaws will drop and heads will nod: “That’s right! It’s not ‘What’s your astrological sign? Read any good books lately?’ That’s the embarrassment, danger. That’s the truth.”

If your finished screenplay contains every scene you’ve ever written, if you’ve never thrown an idea away, if your rewriting is little more than tinkering with dialogue, your work will almost certainly fail. No matter our talent, we all know in the midnight of our souls that 90 percent of what we do is less than our best. If, however, research inspires a pace of ten to one, even twenty to one, and if you then make brilliant choices to find that 10 percent of excellence and burn the rest, every scene will fascinate and the world will sit in awe of your genius.

No one has to see your failures unless you add vanity to folly and exhibit them. Genius consists not only of the power to create expressive beats and scenes, but of the taste, judgment, and will to weed out and destroy banalities, conceits, false notes, and lies.